

Critique: Driving Thru the Fog
Author: William Wise
Critiquer: Annie Mydla
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Critique summary

Dear William,

Thank you so much for trusting me with the critique of this draft of *Driving Thru the Fog*. I'm glad for the chance to express my admiration for what I saw as the book's core material: the Tildenwell-related secrets, Johanne's personal arc of redemption around his lie to Margaret, Suzanne's journey of understanding, the incredible ability of the dialogue to raise tension, the

high level of immersive detail, and more. From a commercial perspective, I also saw opportunities to create more page-turning tension, like consolidating the book around core elements of your choosing, reducing the word count by 40-50k words, creating a stronger main plotline to bring forward momentum to the present day part of the narrative, and considering giving Suzanne a more central role from Chapter 1. This critique will go into all of these topics and provide resources to address them if desired. I'll close with a summary of recommendations and some exercises for inspiration.

A developmental critique is a bird's-eye look at a draft, examining the broadest possible dynamics in structure and content in relation to the author's long-term goals for the book. Developmental critiques often recommend fundamental changes that would demand extensive rewrites. Don't worry if you're not inclined to execute sweeping changes. This critique's true aim is to get the author thinking about developmental tools that could come in handy, maybe in this project, maybe in future ones.

A little bit about me: I'm the managing editor of Winning Writers, and I've been with the organization for about 10 years. In that time, I've critiqued over 500 full-length books and manuscripts and delivered judging feedback on over 2,000 North Street Book Prize entries.

I am honored to be a part of the development of *Driving Thru the Fog* and hope that my comments will be helpful in future iterations of the drafting process.

General strengths

As you read my comments, keep in mind that I already found interest and value in the manuscript as it exists today. There's a lot of good tension in the structure and in the character interactions, and the portrait of Johanne's guilt over lying to Margaret about the ring is very poignant (I cried when he held the wine bottle as he was passing away). I also liked how Suzanne's arc leads her back to John Paul and away from Hayden. It's almost like she was reaffirming her commitment to Tildenwell and the land. Even though Tildenwell would ultimately pass into other hands, Suzanne's demonstration of commitment, and her determination to grow as a person in order to live up to it, was a really satisfying outcome to me. These and other strengths reaffirm what I suspected after reading your North Street entry, that you're a thoughtful author with a lot going right already.

In your submission notes, you said:

Would like to make it commercially viable for an agent but need clarity on if the story is interesting enough to do that, or if, in your opinion the story is too weak and confusing such that it is not worth further efforts on my part.

I don't think the story is weak or confusing. The core story about Suzanne, Johanne, John Paul, Clarence, Sissy, and the secrets at Tildenwell is strong and, I think, potentially marketable. What got in the way for me in this MS was that the scope of the narrative seemed potentially too wide and bulky for the core story. I think agents could be interested in this book if you made just a few broad-stroke changes to double down on the Tildenwell content and consolidate the narrative around a more prominent forward-moving central plotline in the "present" of the book.

I gather that your goal with the book is to find representation. That's great. Perhaps something I might be able to bring to the table in this situation is a discussion on how agents read and what they might look for in a mainstream novel about secrets and lies on a California vineyard. This critique will describe what editing choices could help mold the book into a product they'd feel confident about representing.

The main message I hope to impart in this critique is that agents want to see a book consolidated around its core elements. This critique will give examples of how consolidation might be achieved, but they're not meant as hard recommendations. I simply hope to demonstrate the thought processes of consolidation so that you can then use those tools to make your own decisions.

Topic: Page-turning energy (PTE)

Discussion: What is page-turning energy?

For non-experimental novels in literary or genre fiction, much of what agents are looking for boils down to creating that "page-turning feeling", which for brevity's sake I'll refer to as PTE. PTE is anything that keeps the reader feeling "pulled forward". It typically comes from two main factors: one, making the reader curious about questions they get from the text, and two, whetting the reader's appetite with things they want more of, like beauty, sense of humor, or scares (a factor I call pleasurable). You can read more about sources of PTE here:

<https://winningwriters.com/resources/page-turning-energy-keeping-readers-curious>

Your book is already creating good PTE in so many ways. The book made me curious right off the bat with the Prologue. I immediately wanted to know: How did Johanne get the ring? Did he get it from a dead lady in a plane crash? What will it lead to with Margaret? Will Margaret have to wear a dead lady's ring? Questions like those gave me the PTE feeling agents love. Then the

early pages of the book proper built more PTE, for example, with the mysteries around the Consultant's activities, injuries, and what he might have found in Cellar #2. Immersive detail in the beginning of the book made me feel grounded and added an element of pleasurability to the PTE, like the page 21 description of the tanks that become so important later on ("in some cases, the beautiful oak staves turned into dining tables, the uniqueness of which could not be replicated"—a really nice echo of the book's underlying idea about how Tildenwell is ephemeral but the land is forever. The things we love might transform, but in some way, they still remain).

Dialogue raised PTE throughout the book, for example, in the page 23 conversation in which Johanne brings up ghosts. Another example out of many is the dialogue between Suzanne and Hayden around pages 147-148 about why Suzanne and John Paul broke up. Tension mounts and makes me more curious for a few pages before the revelation about the skeleton, and then it was great how they fall asleep on page 151 without explaining the skeleton. I found myself admiring the sense of rising tension in most of the dialogues in the book regardless of what else was going on in the composition. Take care of that strength.

Your submission notes asked whether the characters seemed realistic. Yes, they do, in part thanks to your ability to show readers things that the characters don't know. For example, I enjoyed learning that Suzanne already knows and likes the side of Hayden that he "generally kept under lock and key" (page 31) when Hayden himself believes just the opposite (page 16, "She did not know him well enough yet to become aware of his deficiencies, and he worried that once she did, she could realize he was not the best fit for her"). PTE city! I also liked Suzanne's character growth from overly permissive to Hayden to recognizing the red flags in hindsight on page 431. Another, more dramatic example is Johanne's realization on page 415 that Margaret already knew the truth about the origin of the ring. Side note: I like the circularity of the detail about Margaret being on the bottling line on page 25, which is originally passed off as an expression of Johanne's desire to be near her, turns out on page 416 to be the reason she finds out the truth about the ring.

Johanne's emotional journey around the ring and not telling Margaret the truth, and Suzanne's eventual uncovering of Johanne's story, seemed like the spiritual core of this draft to me. I see this scene on pages 423-424 as the climax of the book:

Sure enough, there sat a wool bag and inside was a bottle of nineteen hundred and twenty-six Tildenwell Cabernet Sauvignon. Suzanne turned the bottle in her hands, her eyes moving slowly over the label. "This is the sixth bottle. Am I right? You were saving it for the future?"

"I was," Johanne whispered hoarsely. "This vintage is not drinkable, but somehow, I've always wondered what it would be like to taste it again. No longer bitter like now, but a new creation again. I want to taste this lovely wine with Margaret in the

next life. It will be our reunion wine. We'll open it up and there'll be lots of stories, but no lies. Those unsaid things, will all have been forgiven."

Here, the combination of tension in the dialogue, fulfillment of earlier narrative promises about Johanne and Margaret's relationship, the intimate connection to Tildenwell through the old bottle, the fact that the two characters involved in the climax, Suzanne and Johanne, are so deeply tied to the book's other core content, and the immersive spatial and sensory detail made me cry... with happiness about the structural appropriateness of the moment almost as much as the moment itself. Great work.

To consider: Narrowing the scope and lowering the word count of the book could be the single biggest step towards raising PTE, and with it, agents' confidence in the book

The elephant in the room for me with this MS is its scope, or "how much stuff a book includes": geographical breadth, how many characters there are, how many "A" plots and "B" plots, how many settings, themes, concepts, social concerns, how many branches there are away from the book's core material, and so on. Agents are keenly aware of the fact that every time an author adds something to the book's scope, they take a gamble: will this addition raise the book's PTE, or dilute it? A scope agents perceive as too wide will kill the book's prospects, especially if it comes with an extra high word count, like this book does: it's currently about 129k, when agents will typically tolerate up to about 90k in the genre. On the bright side, agents' sensitivity to the impact of an over-wide scope on PTE means that simply narrowing a book's scope can increase its chances of getting representation. I believe that could possibly be the case with this MS.

Your submission notes asked the questions, "Does the ending pull together the story?" and "Does the thread about secrets and lies make sense to a reader, or is it confusing what the story is about? These two concerns indicate to me that you, too, might suspect that the book could be over-full.

If the book is in fact overfull, then one thing that might be contributing to that situation could be that the book's mission statement is relatively open: the book wants to show that "Secrets and lies can alter one's path thru life, and create a lifetime of remorse/fear". That's a statement that leaves room for a lot of different plot lines, characters, settings, and situations. As I read through the book, I suspected it might be possible to effectively communicate the message about secrets and lies by using a smaller set of plot lines, characters, settings, and situations than the book currently does. In fact, one very general editing strategy to move forward on the MS might simply be to ask questions like:

- What is the minimum number of secrets this book can have in order to communicate the book's main message that secrets and lies can change your life for the worse?

- What are the book's essential secrets: the secrets at its core? Which are less core?
- Which secrets have the most to do with the winery and its key figures? Which have less to do with the winery and turn the reader's attention away from the winery and towards the outside world (potentially a distraction)?

The answers to such questions may start to reveal what parts of the book might be essential to keep, and which might be less essential.

To consider: What I felt might be core to the book

Being a critiquer, I couldn't help forming my own perception about what might form the core of the story.

At the very center, for me, is Tildenwell itself: the land, the buildings, the cellars, the machinery, and the wine. The theme about CA vineyards being temporary while the land is forever seems pivotal to both the story and, in its traditionally literary nature, to the genre expression as mainstream fiction.

Plot points connected intimately with the winery also felt core: the plane crash, the ring, the cemetery, and the mystery around Cellar #2.

Finally, the vineyard people felt core: Suzanne, John Paul, Johanne, Margaret, Jose T, Clarence, Sissy, Conolly, Elyse, and, to a lesser extent, Hayden, who is newer to the vineyard.

To consider: What I felt might not be at the core of the book

Writing the list of things that felt "core" to me started to give me a sense of what might not be core. Generally, that included the world outside the vineyard, people who were not intimately connected with the vineyard, and plot points that weren't directly tied to the vineyard.

Possibilities for the list included:

- Gilland
- Gilland's book (Japan, Sukayo, Michael)
- Rolf Kilt
- Gwynne

While I do agree that all of these figures and the plotlines they bring with them do have to do with secrets and lies, they felt farther away from the very center of the book than other figures and plotlines. Here are some of the rough notes I wrote while reading:

PTE: Pages 45-52 are slow, the first part of the book that feels weighted down to me. It's better when they're looking at the grapes and talking about them on pages 53-54, but PTE gets challenged again by the treehouse info at 55-61 [I continued to feel PTE slowing at mentions of the treehouse throughout the book]

PTE: Rolf Kilt content around pages 67-78 is interesting, but felt possibly like a different book. I'm also thinking agents might not want to see 10 pages of italics in a row

PTE: 15-page flashback about Gwynn from pages 316-331 is interesting, but slowing things down and possibly feeling like a different book. Is the Rolf/Gwynn content central? Are the Tildenwell-based lies not sufficient to carry the lies/secrets theme?

PTE: 20-page excerpt of Gilland's book from 459-479 is slowing things down. I want to get back to the Tildenwell-based falling action. For some reason, I just never became invested in Gilland's book. It felt like, well, a different book from the one about Tildenwell.

Once I got on the track about "Tildenwell is core, non-Tildenwell is not core", I started to imagine whether things from Gilland, Rolf, and Gwynn's plotlines that currently help to move the core material forward might be gotten into the book a different way, and I think the answer is yes. I'll share some examples a little later on. By the end of my reading, I ended up wanting to see a version of the book that omitted Gilland, his book, Rolf, and Gwynne, and I suspect agents would, too, due to how the omission could narrow the scope, improve PTE, and bring the word count into a salable range.

To consider: The "bringing things closer to other things" game

Agents like to see books consolidated around their core elements. Going forward, one editing strategy to consider might be "bringing things closer to other things": deciding what the core elements are, then going page by page and reevaluating everything in the book based on how close or far away it is from that core. If it's really far away, it could be omitted or transferred to another project/given its own project. If it's close but not close enough, it could get reworked.

I'll give a couple of examples of things I thought were related to the core, but could be "brought closer to other things" at the core: Johanne's death and the character functions of Hayden.

Johanne's death. I thought the scenes around Johanne's death were well presented and highly related to the book's core plotlines, characters, and themes. On the other hand, I wondered whether the *reason* for the death could be brought closer to the core. I kept asking myself, why mushrooms? There seems to be a setup attempted for Johanne and the mushrooms around page 209, but a climactic event like the drawn-out death of a central character typically is directly

connected to what's at the bottom of the main plotline. For that reason, I'd have liked to see Johanne's death be more clearly a casualty of the secrets and lies in the vineyard.

One way to bring Johanne's death "closer to other things" might be to relate it to the long-term effects of exposure to toxic gases like those mentioned around page 200-201:

Johanne told me that if you take a deep breath of that, it will knock you on your butt and the fumes make it feel like there is literally a candle burning inside your nose. He said that it happened to him a few times. And when it did, he wasn't even in a confined space like the tank.

Here, we learn that Johanne was aware of the dangers of toxic fumes in the cellars, and that he was even exposed to them more than once. Might those exposures have a cumulative effect on his lungs over the years, resulting in a seemingly sudden failure of the respiratory system in his elder years? It seems plausible to me.

Another benefit of connecting Johanne's death to fumes might be structural. The book already has plenty of mentions of CO₂, asphyxiation, the wine tanks, like how the boards were repurposed for many things and even became part of the table Johanne and Margaret would sit at. Bringing Johanne's death closer to the vineyard by connecting it with the cellars would turn all previous mentions of gases, cellars, tanks, etc., into foreshadowing. That could help to make the book feel structurally compact and multilayered in the way agents like.

Hayden as a character. I thought Hayden had some functions as a character that are very close to core plotlines, characters, and themes. He is 1) a potential new chance for Suzanne and 2) someone who helps Suzanne unravel the mysteries at the vineyard. However, the more I read, the more it occurred to me that much of what his character brings to the table (Gilland, Gilland's book, long passages of italics as Hayden reads the book, his considerations about the book afterwards) lies outside the vineyard: secrets and lies, yes, but possibly not ones essential to the core material.

What would it be like if Hayden's role supported the core material about the vineyard rather than drawing readers' attention somewhere else? It might be productive to consider preserving the two functions I mentioned but pruning back the other things he brings with him. For example, one thing to try might be trimming back Hayden's passages of interiority (reported thought, free indirect speech) and showing his thoughts just as far as they let us see he means well but is a bad fit for Suzanne. I suspect that could help the book feel more core-focused to an evaluative reader like an agent.

Another "bring things closer to other things" idea to try might be replacing some of Hayden's plot-driving functions with a character who's more core to the vineyard, like maybe Suzanne. For example, I'd have liked to see Suzanne as the one responsible for liaising with the Consultant at the beginning of the book. She has been more central to the vineyard for longer, so when I imagine her taking over some of Hayden's plot functions, it feels right to me. I'll talk a little more about that later on.

Hayden as a secondary character could still be a love interest foil to John Paul and help out with the investigative side of the book. For example, he and Suzanne could still have conversations like this one on page 144. I liked this part:

“Maybe it was meant for an upcoming proposal, but maybe it wasn’t,” Hayden went on. “No one knows if it was there before the plane crash. The ‘De Plauset’ Vineyard has been in Clarence’s family for years and, as far as I understand it, has been replanted twice. I’ve also heard that before trespassing laws were so strict, there were also neighbors of wealth who had no boundaries while walking the land with their dogs. It could be the ring was dropped there unknowingly by someone years before all this and then ‘boom,’ a plane comes crashing down onto it. Suddenly, it’s intertwined with a big, mysterious accident.”

It's a great point to bring up that the ring might not have had anything to do with the crash at all, especially because I already knew just enough more than Hayden to really feel in my gut that the ring *did* have to do with the crash. The discrepancy between what he wanted to believe, or at least suggest, and what I knew helped Hayden's characterization as just a little too passive for Suzanne, while also raising the stakes for the mystery to be solved—this moment made me worry that the characters might content themselves with a shoulder shrug. Of course, my anxiety was unfounded on that score. This was just another example of how good you are at raising tension through dialogue. Hayden as a secondary character with low interiority could continue to be a useful tool for raising PTE about matters close to the book's core.

These are just two examples of "bringing things closer to other things". As in the rest of the critique, my purpose is not to dictate what edits to make. I simply hope to demonstrate a strategy for editing that could narrow scope, help PTE, and raise agent confidence in the book. Consolidating a book around a smaller group of elements will help those three things no matter what the elements themselves are.

To consider: The "book within a book" and backwards-looking drama might be dragging PTE and could discourage agents

Along with the scope, PTE might be affected for agents by two specific storytelling strategies: 1) the book within a book and 2) the tendency of the plot to happen in the past rather than in the present. Both of these storytelling techniques are commonly used in MSs by early career authors to the exclusion of a strong forward-moving plotline in the present of the book. I think that might be happening here, and I think it might reduce agent confidence.

The "book within a book" content in particular might be bringing the reader away from Tildenwell, not only because the book is about Japan, but because the focus on the creative activity of writing diverts attention away from the main creative action of Tildenwell, winemaking.

The backward-looking plot might be a problem not so much because it's a bad technique (on the contrary, "uncovering what happened in the past" is a literary staple), but because in the current MS, it's not paired with a strong main forward-moving plotline in the present. I was initially excited about the mystery around the Consultant's behavior, but it was soon buried under other things. The rising action was episodic, and although dialogue built tension and PTE, the tension got dispersed for me because it wasn't incorporated into a clear central plotline and kept getting interrupted by the Gilland- and Rolf-related content. I'd have liked to see a version of the book with a stronger, main, Tildenwell-centric plotline in the present to keep things moving forward while the Tildenwell-based revelations from the past are being uncovered.

If you decide to firm up the main plotline in the present day timeline, questions to ask might be: What is at stake for Tildenwell in the present day? And how can I demonstrate that to the reader on every page, starting on page 1?

To consider: Giving Suzanne the main role from the beginning could make the narrative more efficient overall and increase PTE from page to page

Maybe part of the reason I felt drag in the rising action was that character emphasis switched for me. At the beginning, the main character seemed to be Hayden, with his lengthy passages of interiority, his interest in Cellar #2 and responsibility towards the Consultant, his perspective on Suzanne and how that relationship is going, and the way he branches the story off from Tildenwell over to Gilland and Japan. However, when I got to what I felt might be the book's climax, the emotional scene between Suzanne and Johanne as he is dying, it felt more like Suzanne had become the main character. And I realized I'd have liked to read a version of the book in which Suzanne had been the main character all along.

Main characters are really hard to design and calibrate from the very beginning of a book project, because the character's growth and the story's growth don't always end up going together in the long run. For example, it often happens that the figure who's the main character in early drafts is

in later drafts revealed to actually have been a form of "scaffolding": something in the book that helps get the bulk of the writing done and leads to discoveries of what is "core". When later drafts have been reached, that scaffolding can be reduced to let the real main structure stand out. Could Hayden have been the scaffolding that led to Suzanne's story coming into being? Could his role now be trimmed back to let her story stand out?

Sometimes there's a different situation in which a developing draft becomes like a tree growing fruit. As the main character grows in the context of the story the author planned, the MC starts to bring his own story into the book. His story grows bigger and bigger until it starts to take readers away from the story the book originally meant to tell. In that case, the author has received a gift: a fruit containing the seed of a new book. The author can pick the fruit out of the story and keep it for later, then go back to the story he originally meant to tell, perhaps using a pruned-back version of the character who produced the fruit. Could Hayden be the fruit-bearing character in this situation? Has he produced the seed of a whole different book that could be plucked out of the current draft and repotted in its own project?

The more I thought about it, the more it made sense to me to make Suzanne a more central character. She is more intimately involved with Tildenwell, its main figures, and its past than Hayden is. She has a direct personal connection to Johanne's secret, John Paul's secret, and Clarence's secret. In that way, she might be better positioned to transmit the emotional, psychological, and plot ramifications of those secrets to readers than Hayden, who is an extra step removed from the three Tildenwell men.

It occurred to me that Suzanne could do most of what Hayden is doing right now—dealing with the aftermath of the Consultant's injury, finding the buffalo nickels, and so on. For example, on page 445, I love the twist that Sissy is the jilted employee who tormented Clarence, and I would love it even more if Suzanne was the one to find that out from Conolly instead of Hayden.

I'd be interested to see a version of this book where the "A" plotline was Suzanne's investigation of the intertwined mysteries of Cellar #2 and the plane crash (especially if there were additional stakes for Tildenwell in the present day). The "B" plotline might be about her romantic life: she's trying things on with Hayden, but there's an ongoing tension with John Paul on the vineyard. I imagine Suzanne's increased role from the beginning of the book might create more opportunities to build tension with John Paul and make their reunion at the end feel more like an arrival.

Overall, I suspect that all of the same Tildenwell-related plot points could happen with Suzanne as the main character. The only question would be who and how. I believe you could easily solve those questions, for example, through a process of "bringing things closer to other things".

To consider: Replacing Gilland with a reporter might increase urgency around the crash investigation and, by extension, PTE

I do realize that there are already some stakes to Tildenwell in the present day plotline, and moreover, that Gilland is involved with them. For example, on pages 187 and 227, Conolly is worried/irritated by the thought that Gilland might somehow spread ideas about the crash to the outside world (page 227, "These writer types hang out with other writers,' Conolly went on. 'Which includes newspaper writers, right? My fear is that the stories will get told by him to a newspaper friend"). Those are good stakes! And it's good that an attempt has been made to involve Gilland more in the Tildenwell plot.

At the same time, I see degrees of remove in the situation that dilute the stakes for me: Gilland *might* tell a writer friend about his ideas, and that writer friend *might* be a newspaper writer who *might* then become interested. The stakes are there, but that's too many "mights" for me to feel urgency around them.

Being more direct with the threat might help make the stakes feel more real. For example, what about taking away the "mights" and replacing Gilland with a reporter or other kind of researcher who is actively interested in rumors of a crash at Tildenwell? That could kickstart a strong main plotline in the present as the Tildenwell staff (Suzanne?) try to get ahead of the story through their own investigation.

I recognize that Gilland has some Tildenwell-related expository functions in the current draft. For example, his conversation with Hayden around page 199 about the gases could still happen, just in a different way. Some brainstorming on how to "bring things closer to other things" could yield solutions closer to the book's core content.

Topic: Target audience (TA)

To consider: Certain parts of this book might possibly alienate a progressive target audience, and by extension agents

Agents tend to be concerned about whether any of a book's content will alienate the potential target audience. If agents sense this as a possibility, they may shy away from a book they'd otherwise be interested in, even if the content takes up a relatively small proportion of the word count.

I get the sense that your target audience is mostly made up of progressive readers, which would be a good choice from a commercial perspective. Progressive adults remain a top reading

demographic in the US. Agents know this and tend to be more attracted to books with progressive themes. On the other hand, I thought that certain parts of the book connected to the Spanish-speaking employees of Tildenwell and Hayden's somewhat old-fashioned views on gender roles might alienate progressive readers. You might not end up agreeing with what I have to say on this, and that's fair enough, but I wanted to bring it up in case the material had snuck in by accident and you wanted to change it.

For example, I myself thought the book could have gone more in depth with the Spanish-speaking employees of Tildenwell. From what I understand, and as you must certainly already know, "Hispanic" is a catch-all term that includes Spanish speakers and Spanish-influenced cultures worldwide. Referring to the Spanish-speaking tertiary characters simply as "Hispanics" seemed incongruous to me in how far out it zoomed from those characters' identities, farther out than other tertiary characters in the story (imagine if all white tertiary characters were referred to as "the English-speakers"). The idea of a "Hispanic accent" also seemed over-general to me (pages 376 and 450) due to the very many different kinds of Hispanic accents out there between all the Spanish-speaking cultures, some thousands of miles apart from each other and on different continents. Progressive readers may pick up on these details. Agents know this and may hear alarm bells when they encounter such content.

Character-wise, Spanish-speaking men seemed to be looked down on. The old stereotype about laziness came out on page 149 ("The women also did not appear to get bored as easily as the men and, therefore, did a better job"), and on page 417, the book seems to imply that two of the so-called "Hispanics" were the ones bragging about finding the ring with the woman's finger still attached. One thing that stuck out to me personally as possibly off was how little attention Jose T received in the story, considering that he seemed to know all the main secrets already. The narrative would bring him in here and there as a foreman figure, Marcela's dad, the one who laid down the Tomahawk on page 450, all minor roles that add to the flavor of the vineyard setting. And yet, despite his direct involvement in the events that led to the secrets being kept, he is never a direct participant in the narrative's unraveling of the mysteries. His knowledge sometimes surfaces, but it is always related secondhand by a white character who found it out from him in the past. That made it seem almost like the secrets were only important when it was a white person keeping them or telling them. Again, that's something that might bother progressive readers, and by extension agents.

Going back to PTE, the way the book treats Jose T despite his knowledge seemed like a possible structural flaw to me. If Suzanne had walked up to Jose T at the beginning of the story and asked, "Would you tell me everything about John Paul, Clarence, and Johanne that I might not already know? Anything shady going on there?" everything might have come out immediately. After all, Jose T didn't seem especially protective or self-conscious about the secrets and had no problem telling others what he knew, as demonstrated by the fact that various people around the vineyard

did know bits and pieces from past conversations with him. I'd have liked to see a version of this book in which Jose T was a primary character who joined in the investigation and helped clear up the secrets. Maybe he had always been bothered by the behaviors of Clarence, John Paul, and Johanne and had seen enough to know the three men were acting shady, but didn't know exactly how, and was curious about finding out the answers (just for instance). Maybe he could fill some of the expository/investigative functions that currently belong to Gilland and Hayden.

It occurred to me that the book could be using the vineyard admins' ignoring of Jose T as an asset to give the book an anti-racist edge. For example, if Johanne had simply gotten to know Jose T, he might have learned much earlier that Margaret already knew about the origins of the ring, saving himself years of guilt and pain. If the book picked up on this irony and was more forward about presenting it to the reader as a feature of the story, it could become a statement about how individuals' racism, classism, and xenophobia can keep them boxed into misconceptions and prolong suffering that was unnecessary to begin with. Progressive readers might like that, and by extension, so might agents.

Before I close the critique, I'd like to mention one more thing that might alienate progressive readers and the agents who cater to them. Hayden's views on gender roles can seem a little outdated at times. For example, on page 17, he calls Conolly's ability to create 'the right atmosphere for an entertainment event' "almost unmanly". Since when is it unmanly to know how to throw a party and schmooze? On page 249, Suzanne uses the f-word, and it seems "unladylike" to Hayden, "so unlike her". Since Hayden is still coming across as the main character at that part of the book, it's almost like the book is wagging a finger at me saying, "Real women don't swear!" Will that really make Hayden sympathetic to the progressive readers of 2026? Agents might not be sure.

Fair enough if the book is trying to be accurate about the past. The depiction of prejudice can serve as a form of protest and social critique. If that is what you are going for, it might be market-friendly to differentiate more between the characters' point of view and the book's point of view. The keyword for this technique is "tone" if you want to learn more.

Suggested craft resources to learn about tone:

1. <https://writersfunzone.com/blog/2023/06/27/the-difference-between-author-tone-and-voice-and-why-its-important-to-have-both-by-laurel-osterkamp/>
2. <https://www.thoughtco.com/tone-writing-definition-1692183>
3. <http://web.archive.org/web/20220704064223/https://www.macgregorandluedeke.com/blog/literary-devices-for-the-real-world-tone/>
4. <https://winningwriters.com/resources/exploitation-versus-representation>

5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internalized_oppression (Sometimes, authors perpetuate prejudices in their fiction if they themselves have been victims of those same prejudices and internalized society's negative messages.)

Recommendations

This manuscript has strengths in its interesting core material: the Tildenwell-related secrets, Johanne's person arc of redemption around his lie to Margaret, Suzanne's journey of understanding, the incredible ability of the dialogue to raise tension, the high level of immersive detail, and more. Potential avenues for commercial-friendly development might include:

1. Doubling down on consolidating the book around core content and "bringing things closer to other things"
2. Reconsidering the use of the "book within a book" and backwards-looking drama, possibly removing the book within a book and supplementing the backwards-looking drama with a stronger forward-moving plotline in the present
3. Considering making Suzanne the main character from the beginning, possibly giving her some of the narrative functions currently fulfilled by Hayden
4. Considering replacing Gilland with a reporter to increase urgency around the uncovering of the secrets and lies
5. If the target audience is progressive, combing the MS for details that could possibly alienate them, and by extension, agents

Thank you again for allowing me to read this draft of *Driving Thru the Fog* and offer my comments. I hope to see more from you in the future.

Exercises

Exercise. Identifying core elements

1. Journal for 15 minutes on what you believe to be your book's core elements. Try to be as specific as possible ("secrets and lies" might not be specific enough). Then answer the following questions:
 - a. Which parts of my book go together in terms of geography, visuals, atmosphere? Which don't go so well together?

- b. Which characters and plotlines of the book are the most intimately connected to the main setting of the book? Which are less intimately connected (being newcomers, or bringing the reader's attention outside the main setting?)
 - c. What does my gut tell me about what parts of the book are core and what aren't?
- 2. Once you have identified your core elements, journal on the following questions:
 - a. In what ways does the current version of your book already use your core elements? In what ways doesn't it?
 - b. Is your core material at all 6 main narrative stages? (See <https://www.storyboardthat.com/articles/e/plot-diagram>). If not, why? How could it be incorporated into all six in a future version?
 - c. Is your core material evident on the first page of Chapter 1? If not, how could it be made present (imagery, writing style, plot point, other?)
 - d. Does the book have any content that distracts from the core material? For example, in...
 - i. The setting
 - ii. Plot
 - iii. Themes
 - iv. Atmosphere
 - v. Character types
 - vi. Character arcs
 - vii. Other?

Exercises. Honing your book's main plot focus.

- 1. Re-outline either the current version of the book around the six main narrative stages, informed by your core content:
 - a. Exposition:
 - b. Inciting incident:
 - c. Rising action:
 - d. Climax:
 - e. Falling action:
 - f. Resolution:
- 2. Go through your MS page by page and make an exhaustive list of the current characters and plot events. For each character and plot event, label them Primary, Secondary, or Tertiary. Let the list sit for a week, then look again. Journal for 15 minutes the question,

"What would this list look like if I allowed myself only 1 main protagonist, 1 main antagonist, 2-3 secondary characters, and 3-5 tertiary characters, prioritized based on how close they are to the book's core content?"

3. Look at your book's focus through the lens of genre by answering the following questions:
 - a. What is the main genre of my book, and how does it connect to my core content?
 - b. In my chosen genre, what kind of characters tend to be main characters?
 - c. What are some examples of a central plotline within this genre?
 - d. What kinds of characters tend to be supporting characters in this genre?
 - e. What kinds of supporting plotlines tend to occur?
 - f. How can I use this knowledge to increase focus in my own book?
 - g. How can I give a nod to these genre conventions while making them my own, especially in how they intersect with my core content?
4. Read this article about rising action: <https://www.nownovel.com/blog/rising-action-definition-examples/>. Then journal for 15 minutes on what the rising action might look like if it were shorter, had a strong main plotline, and was centered around the book's core material.
5. Copy and paste the book's text into its own new document. Read through it, highlighting any material that does not directly support the main plotline or core content. When you're done highlighting, delete the highlighted material. Let the now-slimmer document sit for one month, then look again. Does the material there point to any new ways forward?